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ARTS & LIFE

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Rock and roll and reading

THESE ESSENTIAL TITLES provide invaluable insights into the popular music of the last century

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MUSIC

The 930 pages (including index and source notes) of Tune In, the first of three projected volumes on the Beatles by Mark Lewishon — with a 1,500-word version available — is perhaps an exaggerated indication of how far rock music scholarship has travelled. After all, rock and its variants is a global phenomenon, not just a youthful "fad" — here today, gone tomorrow, serviced by teen fave-rave magazines — that highbrows termed it when Elvis Presley burst on the American landscape in 1956 and, eight years later, The Beatles.

The "literature" of pop and rock is essential to modern cultural studies, having yielded in the '60s a "rock establishment" foisting common truths and taboos.

Case in point: If the conformist postwar generation was shocked by Elvis Presley's sexuality and hopped-up beat, their progeny was shocked by Albert Goldman's lurid, less-than-reverential (and mostly true) biography, **Elvis (1981)**. The counterculture reviewers savaged the tome. The corrective was Peter Guralnick's detailed **Last Train to Memphis (1994)** and **Careless Love (1999)**, a sober socio-cultural analysis celebrating Presley's populist talents. Read Guralnick first, then Goldman for the full measure of the latter's iconoclasm.

The Sound of the City, The Rise of Rock and Roll, by British historian Charlie Gillett (1970) is a seminal masterpiece covering R & R's first 15 years: "Rock and roll was perhaps the first form of popular culture to celebrate without reservation characteristics of city life that had been among the most criticized."

Shout! The Beatles in Their Generation, by Philip Norman (1982) was the first major post-breakup bio: "Only in ancient times, when boy emperors and pharaohs were clothed, even fed with pure gold, had very young men commanded an equivalent adoration, fascination and constant, expectant scrutiny." More original is **Can't Buy Me Love: The Beatles, Britain, and America, by Jonathan Gould (2007)**, written in a beautifully critical style and, importantly, comparing their impact on both sides of the Atlantic.

The James Brown Reader: 50 Years of Writing About the Godfather of Soul, edited by Nelson George and Alan Leeds (2008): Dispatches and features, in real time, on the extraordinary life of the little-big-man who pioneered soul and invented funk (including a 1970 interview by yours truly). The book's climax features two very long pieces by Philip Gourevitch (Rolling Stone) and Jonathan Lethem (The New Yorker).

The One, by R.J. Smith (2012): The title refers to Brown's emphasis on the first beat in a four-beat measure, which he explained cryptically: "The upbeat is rich, the downbeat is poor." Smith's bio is the first detailed account, loaded with new revelations of Soul One's genius and tyranny. His unique scream "shows the control Brown has over a technique most often used to signify a loss of control."

Life, by Keith Richards (2010) is rightly considered the most entertaining and revealing rock autobiography, "Keef" coming to the World's Greatest Rock 'n' Roll Band's emotional rescue. Very simpatico. More pungent is **The True Life Adventures of the Rolling Stones, by Stanley Booth (1984)**, a devil-may-care, microscopically detailed account of the Altamont debacle, woven with biographical material that's either missing or ripped off in Richards's book. Point of view is altered when Booth accompanies Richards on drug runs and side alleys; little wonder it took 15 years to write.

Chronicles, Volume I, by Bob Dylan (2004) is a memoir like no other: pithily impressionistic and atmospheric, focusing on a few episodes in his mythic life; he reveals and doesn't reveal, with a magician's sleight of hand. The myth is only enhanced. **Bob Dylan in America, by Sean Wilentz (2010)**, sets our hero in old and new social and musical contexts; very original. Dylan was more cagey than reclusive, in **Bob Dylan; The Essential Interviews, edited by Jonathan Cott (2006)**.

I'm Your Man, by Sylvie Simmons (2012): In Montreal for interviews, veteran British pop writer Simmons vowed not to get seduced by Leonard Cohen's poetic palaver. Better luck next time! Actually, her closeness to him yielded major insights into how he works and the inspirations behind what Cohen calls "blackening pages."

The Rise and Fall of the Wall of Sound, by Mick Brown (2007): The jaw-dropping saga of Phil Spector, rock's most creative producer (The Crystals, Ronettes, John Lennon, George Harrison, Cohen), and a megalomaniac whose ego translated into a swirling, overwrought sound. He accused those who dissed his insistent personality for not having "the same sense of humour as I do." In prison for murder, he still controls reissues. A page-turner.

The Aesthetics of Rock (1970): Meltzer invented rock criticism in 1965 with part of this mock academic tome (riddled with footnotes and references to everyone from Kierkegaard to the Trashmen). "I have thus deemed it a necessity to describe rock 'n' roll by allowing my description to be itself a parallel artistic effort." Indispensable.

Goldstein's Greatest Hits, by Richard Goldstein (1970); A Whore Just Like the Rest, by Richard Meltzer (2000): There's nothing like reading rock articles as the music developed: hindsight battles with immediacy. Starting in 1965, Goldstein wrote the first weekly rock column, for the Village Voice, brilliantly focusing on lifestyle of acts and fans alike. Meltzer fuses criticism and memoir in this adventurous selection of writings, including brutally frank dissections of his relationships with the acts.

Hellfire, by Nick Tosches (1982): Southern religious fervour meets rock 'n' roll equals the sound of sinner Jerry Lee Lewis, whose marriage to his 13-year-old cousin wrecked his career. The genius behind rock's first great biography is the way Tosches elucidates The Killer's demented fever, simultaneously creative and destructive, in a neo-biblical style.

Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung, by Lester Bangs (1987); Main Lines, Blood Feasts, and Bad Taste: A Lester Bangs Reader (2003): The most famous rock critic — who had a movie made about him (Almost Famous) and a book (Let It Blurt by Jim DeRogatis) — lived rock 'n' roll obsessively (killing him in a booze and Darvon daze). Simultaneously entertaining and chaotic.

Inside the Music of Brian Wilson, by Philip Lambert (2007) is scholarly without being pedantic, connecting surf elementals to orchestral magic by explaining how the Beach Boys genius thinks. Ambitious, fascinating.

Passion Is a Fashion, The Real Story of The Clash, by Pat Gilbert (2004): Former Mojo editor Gilbert delves into the short, chaotic career of punk's "only band that matters." Sympathetic, but telling in their quixotic relationship to business that helped cause their downfall. Also: Redemption Song: The Ballad of Joe Strummer, by Chris Salewicz (2007)

England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk, by Jon Savage (1991): "Suddenly you did not have to be alone. You submerged. You had a good time by having a bad time. You were full of the poison. ... You attacked the generation of Second World War. ... This was tough stuff, telling England what it did not want to hear." The British writer is especially strong on the socio-cultural side.

The Death of Rhythm & Blues, by Nelson George (1988) investigates "black America's assimilationist obsession (that) is heading it straight toward cultural suicide." From doo-wop to soul, George pays particular attention to business exploitation.

Bass Culture: When Reggae Was King, by Lloyd Bradley (2001): A monstrous socio-cultural tome. Bradley, a black London insider, has an uncanny ability to explain everything — Jamaican history, Rastafarianism, sound techniques, styles, political and social environments, the diaspora — to the general reader. Bob Marley is among a colourful cast of characters in this authoritative yet intimate journey through the ultimate in hybrid music.

The Real Frank Zappa Book, by Zappa with Peter Occhiogrosso (1989): Uncle Frank's own self-mythologizing, typically hectoring, amounts to the bare basics and use of much boldface type for emphasis. Still, it's valuable in reflecting his creative esthetic. **Zappa, by Barry Miles (2004)**, is a good overall work, while **The Dangerous Kitchen: The Subversive World of Zappa, by Canadian writer Kevin Courrier (2004)**, has a more passionate analysis of the songs.

Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation, by Jeff Chang (2005): Chang examines the social and political forces and wide array of characters — from street poets to thugs — that built hip hop from the ghetto to the boardroom. Essential.

The Dirt: Confessions of the World's Most Notorious Rock Band, by Mötley Crüe (2001) is grossly entertaining.

Hammer of the Gods, by Stephen Davis (1985), is definitive Led Zep.

Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk, by Legs McNeil (2006): History as conflicting memories. By turns intriguing (sense of community) and a little sad (sense of self-importance).

Heavier Than Heaven: A Biography of Kurt Cobain, by Seattle writer Charles R. Cross (2001), is a cautionary tale of a young man with a love-hate relationship with stardom that ultimately did him in. Read it with **Cobain's Journals (2003)** — seeing his hand-scrawl is feeling his inner torment.

Crosstown Traffic: Jimi Hendrix & The Post-War Rock 'n' Roll Revolution, by Charles Shaar Murray (1991): Oodles of context on why Hendrix was a true musical revolutionary; as stimulating as its subject. Also: **Room Full of Mirrors, by Charles R. Cross (2006)**.

No One Gets Out of Here Alive, by Danny Sugarman with Jerry Hopkins (1980): a huge bestseller sparking a Doors revival that's never ended. Even better is **Riders on the Storm: My Life with Jim Morrison and the Doors, by John Densmore (1991)**: what it's like working with a self-conscious poet, sex symbol and avatar of Los Angeles hip.

Buried Alive: The Biography of Janis Joplin, by Myra Friedman (1973): Sympathetic portrait of a tragic heroine by her former publicist, and an indictment of the industry and hippie scene that facilitated her death by overdose.

Divided Soul: The Life of Marvin Gaye, by David Ritz (2003): The first Motown artist to produce his discs was split between sexy swagger and religious anguish, until his reverend dad shot him. Ritz, a friendly journalist, does him justice.

Perfecting Sound Forever: An Aural History of Recorded Music, by Greg Milner (2010): A textbook on how to make tech writing sound human, from Edison to Alan Lomax's blues field recording to Spector's Wall of Sound to the Loudness War to digital versus analog. Of dreamers, hucksters and geniuses, this is the most compelling book on studio magic we all take for granted but know little about.

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ASSOCIATED PRESS FILES
Beatlemania: You'll want to read Tune In, the first of three projected volumes on the Beatles by Mark Lewishon.

GAZETTE FILES
Life by the Rolling Stones' Keith Richards is considered the most entertaining and revealing rock autobiography.

STERLING PUBLISHING
Buried Alive is a sympathetic portrait of Janis Joplin, a tragic heroine, by her former publicist.

ASSOCIATED PRESS FILES
Elvis Presley is the subject of biographies Elvis, Last Train to Memphis and Careless Love.

SHANE KELLY/GAZETTE FILES
James Brown, who pioneered soul and invented funk, performs at the Montreal International Jazz Festival in 1988.

SONY MUSIC CANADA
Bob Dylan's 2004 Chronicles is a memoir like no other: pithily impressionistic and atmospheric.

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